

Man sentenced to four years for hit-and-run that killed church usher in Northeast D.C.

By [Peter Hermann](#), Published:
August 30, 2013

An Annapolis man was sentenced Friday to four years in prison for running over and killing a 71-year-old woman moments after she walked out of her church in Northeast Washington.

Joel R. Bromwell, 32, [pleaded guilty](#) in May to involuntary manslaughter and driving under the influence. The victim, Ruby Whitfield, had been a [beloved cafeteria worker at Sidwell Friends School](#), retiring in 2008 after 44 years there.

Bromwell faced up to 30 years in prison, but prosecutors said in D.C. Superior Court documents that he should be credited for acknowledging his conduct and for “showing a willingness to undertake the hard work of amending his life.”

Two friends who saw Whitfield get hit and dragged down Florida Avenue on March 21 called the sentence too lenient. One said the images have forced her into therapy. The other, Jessie Thaxton, said: “That’s all he got? That’s nothing for taking a person’s life in a hit-and-run. He would get more than that for killing an animal.”

The U.S. attorney’s office had sought a term of 54 months.

In a written statement to the court, Bromwell said that “from the morning when I wake up to every night when I go to sleep, I feel the pain and anguish I’ve caused other people. . . . Because of my choices, I’ve hurt people in ways that is not fathomable.”

His attorney, David Benowitz, said Bromwell chose to remain in jail after his arrest, forgoing a chance to be released as the case proceeded, so he could come to terms with what he had done.

“The hard thing about this case is that he has no prior criminal record,” Benowitz said of Bromwell, who is a restaurant manager.

“He’s not an alcoholic. This is one of those awful cases where you have someone who has never done a wrong

thing in his life and all of a sudden makes a disastrous choice.”

The crash outside New Samaritan Baptist Church occurred after an evening ushers’ meeting. Whitfield and two friends, Thaxton and Alice Niblett, were preparing to cross Florida Avenue at 11th Street shortly after 8 and were in a crosswalk.

Niblett and Thaxton said they heard the vehicle — a silver Mercury Mountaineer — approaching and stopped themselves from stepping off the curb. But Whitfield apparently didn’t hear the SUV or the cries from her friends to stop. Whitfield died at a hospital about 30 minutes after arriving, D.C. police said.

Bromwell didn’t stop, but he was confronted by a witness about 10 blocks away at a red light and was arrested a short time later.

At the time, Bromwell told police that he had “felt a bump and knew that something had struck his vehicle.” Police said that he was driving 15 mph over the 25-mph limit and that his blood-alcohol level measured 0.11 percent; the legal limit in the District is 0.08.

The U.S. attorney’s office filed several letters describing Whitfield’s rich life at church and the prestigious school. Among her most cherished students at Sidwell was Chelsea Clinton, with whom she was seen talking. Clinton invited Whitfield to her graduation party in 1997.

Whitfield’s daughter, 42-year-old Tasyha Whitfield, wrote how she raised not only her own children, but also those in her neighborhood.

“She was funny, loved to dance and when she smiled, you would always feel the love of God in her. To see my mother laying on the table at MedStar not breathing, my soul had left me and the happiness in my life has changed.”

She added that the crash was a “heartless and senseless crime” and that she doesn’t accept the remorse that the suspect now expresses.

“It makes me think that if the police didn’t find the man who killed my mother, he would have went on the next day as if nothing had happened.”

Source:

http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/man-sentenced-to-four-years-for-hit-and-run-that-killed-church-usher-in-northeast-dc/2013/08/30/9499edee-11a4-11e3-b4cb-fd7ce041d814_story.html

© The Washington Post Company

